

Freedom from fear

Canada's foreign policy for human security

Human security means freedom from pervasive threats to people's rights, safety or lives

A new era

Since 1996, Canada has argued that contemporary security challenges have changed fundamentally from those of the past; the decline in wars between states may have made states more secure, but a growing number of transnational threats coupled with dozens of brutal civil wars have made people more insecure. Canada has not been alone in advancing this perspective. Other governments, as well as international organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), have pointed to the same transition. Recent events – from the attacks on the World Trade Center to the rebuilding of Afghanistan – confirm the salience of these trends.

The nature of armed conflict has changed in recent decades. Wars are fought almost exclusively within states, though their impacts are felt worldwide. Small arms are frequently the weapon of choice; civilians are often the targets. Children are forcibly recruited by insurgent forces, sexual violence is a deliberate weapon of war, and genocide and ethnic cleansing are pursued as part of state policy. The lines between war and crime are blurring, with rebel groups engaging in organized banditry, and economic predation becoming the rationale for continued fighting.

A globalizing world brings new promises and new threats. Transnational phenomena, including terrorism, international crime and trafficking in small arms, drugs, women and children increase the risks to us all. For all its promise, globalization has a dark underside that requires a broadened understanding of security and new approaches.

A new security

Canada's commitment to human security responds to these new global realities. Human security focusses on the security of people, complementing the traditional emphasis on the security of states. By broadening the focus in this way, human security encompasses a spectrum of approaches to prevent and resolve violent conflicts, to protect civilians where conflicts do exist, and to increase the capacity of states to ensure security for their populations.

Putting people at the centre of security policy enhances national and international security, and promotes human development and well-being. The security of individual states and the broader international system ultimately requires the prevention and resolution of conflicts within states. Human security is strengthened where open, tolerant and responsive states work to ensure the safety of all men, women, boys and girls within their borders. At the same time, human security reinforces the state by strengthening its legitimacy and stability. States, however, do not always guarantee human security. Where states are externally aggressive, internally repressive or too weak to govern effectively, people's security is undermined.

Sierra Leonean Army soldiers patrolling a road stop on the outskirts of Masiaka, Sierra Leone. (2000)

CP/AP (Brenan Linsley)

